

Supporting Children Through Loss and Grief- Developmental Stages



Effective communication techniques and age-appropriate language is necessary to help children understand and express their feelings. Here are some tips for what to say and do at different developmental stages

Infants to 2-year-olds

- Create a photo album of the loved one and have family members and friends write stories of how the loved one thought about and loved the infant.
- A young child may carry this album around and look at the pictures.
- It will also be comforting when the child is older and has a different understanding of the loss but can't remember the person that died.
- Attachment and connection is key at this age, children need the presence of a calm, loving caregiver.

2-to 4-year olds

- Use concrete facts when speaking with young children.
- Avoid euphemisms, use the words dead and died.
- Develop their emotional vocabulary through books and pictures so they have the language to express themselves.
- Tell them who will care for them and talk to them about any changes to their daily routines.
- Provide time and opportunities for play and access to a variety of art and creative materials.
- Don't be alarmed when they talk about death to anyone, even strangers.

Developmental Stages (con't)

5- to 8- year olds

- Use concrete language.
- Be ready to answer the same questions over and over again.
- They need reassurance that they did not cause it no matter what they thought or did and that the person loved them even if they said something mean or didn't do what they asked.
- They need reassurance of who will take care of them.
- Increase their emotional vocabulary by using age-appropriate books and pictures about emotions or death.
- Provide opportunities for energetic play.

8- to 12- year olds

- Answer their questions honestly and accurately.
- Wonder with them when there is not an answer. Share what you think and believe.
- Listen well and validate their feelings and experiences.
- If possible, find a peer group for grieving children.
- Scripts for dealing with difficult questions and conversations can be helpful.
- Talk about your own feelings and what you do to take care of yourself. Model self-care.



Developmental Stages (con't)

13- to 18- year olds

- They may be exploring philosophical questions around the meaning of life, spirituality or how to explain traumatic events.
- A peer grief group may be helpful.
- If possible, connect them with other adults in your family or community that they may be able to use as supports.
- They may be uncomfortable having conversations with the adult they are closest too.
- Listen and validate their feelings and experiences.
- Be flexible when needed to allow for expression of grief. A day off school once in a while may be warranted.
- They need to know that the adults will take care of them and others in the family.
- They may have questions about finances and other family matters. Provide information as appropriate.
- Ask open-ended questions like, “help me understand what this is like for you.”
- Model self-care.

